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ABSTRACT

When school board members consider the question of sharing a superintendent between two or more districts, they often lack the necessary information to make a sound decision. In addition, they often do not consider the changes in roles, relationships, and responsibilities that must occur in such a situation. This paper, based on a questionnaire survey, examines expectations of the shared superintendent held by 78 superintendents and 161 board of education chairs in Iowa and Minnesota school districts that participated in such an arrangement. Most of these districts had enrollments of less than 600 students. Perceptions of the role of the shared superintendent were relatively consistent between superintendents and school board chairs. Both groups agreed that: (1) the task importance of school finance was number one; (2) financial savings was the primary reason for sharing a superintendent; (3) school board members were the strongest supporters of the arrangement, while community members and staff were the strongest opposition; and (4) financial savings was the most frequent advantage of sharing a superintendent, and availability and burnout were the most frequent disadvantages. School board chairs were more enthusiastic than superintendents about renewing the arrangement. Almost half of superintendents preferred to serve a single district. Comments emphasized the importance of the superintendent's abilities and personality and the support of staff and board. Suggestions included limiting the arrangement to a short period of time, and viewing the arrangement as a preliminary step to school district reorganization. (SV)

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Background

The effectiveness of any public school in a democratic society depends on the degree to which it maintains public support and confidence. This confidence and support can be maintained only if the public understands the purposes of the schools and knows that prudent practices prevail in their operation.

Leadership of the public schools concerns every member of society. During the past twenty years, superintendents and school board members have been inundated with new demands which have affected their roles, responsibilities, and relationships. As school board members and superintendents interact, their mutual perceptions of their roles, relationships, and responsibilities become extremely important. These perceptions may act as determinants for their respective role behavior.

When school board members consider the question of sharing a superintendent between two or more districts, they often lack the information necessary to make a sound decision. To further complicate the situation, they often do not consider the changes in roles, relationships, and responsibilities that must occur with one person serving as the chief executive officer of two or more school districts.

The idea of the school district originated with the Massachusetts Law of 1789, which affirmed the Old Deluder Satan Law of 1647 and authorized towns to establish boundaries for school support and attendance that would be called districts. The office of the superintendent was not a prominent one before 1865. After 1865, the office emerged and became possibly the most crucial position in American education. Research indicates that there have been four major conceptions of the superintendency which have been labeled and classified into periods as follows: the first, from 1865 to 1910, in which superintendents were regarded as scholarly educational leaders; the second, from 1910 to 1930, in which the concept of a business manager or school executive was dominant; the third, from 1930 to 1954, in which the superintendent was seen as an educational statesman in a democratic school; and the fourth from 1954 to present, in which the superintendent was seen as a mixture of an applied social scientist and business manager.

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In 1984, 21 states reported shared superintendent arrangements involving over 400 districts and 212 superintendents during the 1983-84 school year. Although this inter-district organizational alternative has shown an increase in use, it has received little research attention. Some states, such as Vermont, with many small districts have mandated this arrangement. In other states, participating in a shared superintendent arrangement is a discretionary power of the local school board.

A Study

The purpose of my study was to investigate and compare the expectations of the superintendent as perceived by the superintendent and the school board chair of school districts in Iowa and Minnesota sharing a superintendent of schools. The population of the study included the identified public school superintendents and school board chairs of schools in Iowa and Minnesota who were participating in a sharing arrangement with one or more other school districts in 1988-89. There were 39 superintendents in Iowa and 39 in Minnesota. There were 80 school board chairs in Iowa and 81 in Minnesota. A questionnaire was designed to be similar in composition for both the superintendents and school board chairs.

Findings

The major findings which follow were based upon the data gathered as a result of the survey questionnaires.

A majority of the school districts involved in a shared superintendent arrangement had an enrollment of less than 600 pupils and were less than 15 miles from the nearest high school.

The task importance of school finance was ranked number one by superintendents and school board chairs and did not change rank when two or more school districts participated in sharing a superintendent's services.

Collective bargaining and school construction were ranked eighth and ninth out of nine, respectively, by superintendents and school board chairs and did not change rank when two or more school districts participated in sharing a superintendent's service.

School board chairs and superintendents reported that board members initiated the idea of sharing a superintendent and that financial savings was the primary reason two or more districts decided to share a superintendent.

School board chairs and superintendents agreed that the strongest supporters of sharing a superintendent were school board members and they tended to agree that community members and staff members were the strongest opposition to sharing a superintendent.

Financial savings was the most frequent advantage of sharing a superintendent and, availability and burnout were the most frequent disadvantages of sharing a superintendent.

School board chairs were more enthusiastic about sharing a superintendent again than were superintendents about reconsidering a shared superintendency.

Almost half of the superintendents prefer to serve a single district.

A majority of school board chairs and superintendents believed that sharing a superintendent between two or more school districts is a good idea and that it assisted in accomplishing intended school board goals.

Athletics was the most frequent area that was reported shared by districts sharing a superintendent.

A majority of the school board chairs and superintendents reported that the number of administrators decreased when two or more districts entered into a shared superintendent arrangement.

The perception of the role of the shared superintendent in Iowa and Minnesota between the school board chairs and superintendents is relatively consistent.

Suggestions

There were a number of significant comments and suggestions for superintendents and school boards contemplating a shared superintendent arrangement. A summarization of those comments follows:

The superintendent is key. He or she must be able to deal with stress effectively and maintain good public relations. Careful selection of a successful, experienced superintendent who is willing to give 100+%, and be capable of a huge work load. The ability to walk on water is helpful.

A good support staff, including building principals, is a must. Board members must be willing to support and cooperate with employees from all districts involved.

A sharing arrangement should be for a short period of time. Three years seems to be a reasonable amount of time. The time

demands on a superintendent are unmanageable and will lead to burnout over a longer period of time.

A sharing arrangement should only be considered if it will lead to reorganization of the school districts involved. A four or five year plan should be developed to insure that the involved districts will make a decision about the future sharing of all activities and that the question of consolidation is addressed.

Don't share a superintendent for financial reasons alone. The board and community goals must be in common and it is important to keep the community informed.

When school districts are considering sharing a superintendent, it is important that they discuss the advantages, and disadvantages of sharing a superintendent with school board members and superintendents who have had experience with joint administrative agreements.

School board members and the superintendent need to have discussed and agreed to a clear, written agreement that spells out the expectations of the shared superintendent before implementing the position. The school board and superintendent should also agree, on a yearly basis, to review and revise the role expectations of the shared superintendent.

The state superintendent's organization, state school board's organization, and state departments of education need to develop and disseminate guidelines and recommendations for school districts contemplating a joint administrative agreement.